# UX Gamification Redefined

## The Right & Wrong Strategies

UXPin

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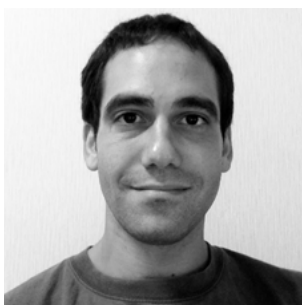
With a passion for writing and an interest in everything anything related to design or technology, Matt Ellis found freelance writing best suited his skills and allowed him to be paid for his curiosity. Having worked with various design and tech companies in the past, he feels quite at home at UXPin as the go-to writer, researcher, and editor. When he's not writing, Matt loves to travel, another byproduct of curiosity.

# Introduction

Games and UX design often feed into each other because both share a unique trait that separates them from other mediums: interactivity. Users don't interact with movies or books the same way they do with video games and sites/apps. In fact, the two fields even share devices; most people have more than one game installed on their computer or smartphone, and almost all gaming devices have Internet access.



*Photo credit: Zombies, Run!*

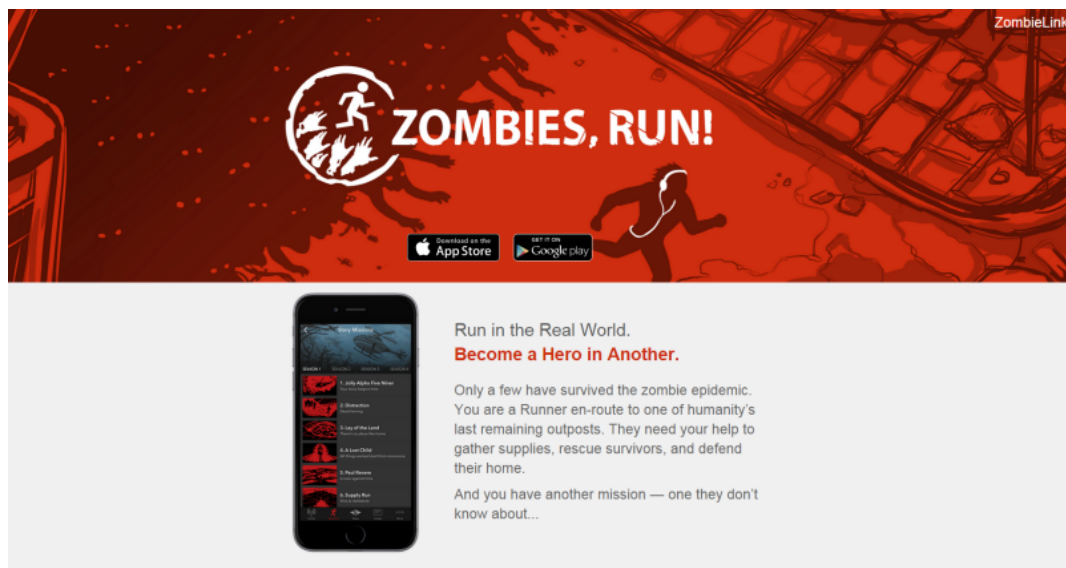It's natural, then, that gaming influences UX design. Gamifying a site or app can create a more fulfilling and personal UX – not to mention

it more fun. However, designers must learn from the mistakes of the past, and it's not enough to simply include badges or a point system.

This piece will explain how to go beyond just adding game elements to your UI, and how to achieve *meaningful* gamification.

# Gamification and
# the Habit Loop

Most sites serve some purpose beyond entertainment. This even refers to sites which feature games in order to spread brand awareness – without the objective of drawing attention to the brand, they wouldn't exist. The KFC video game below wouldn't exist if it weren't promoting KFC.
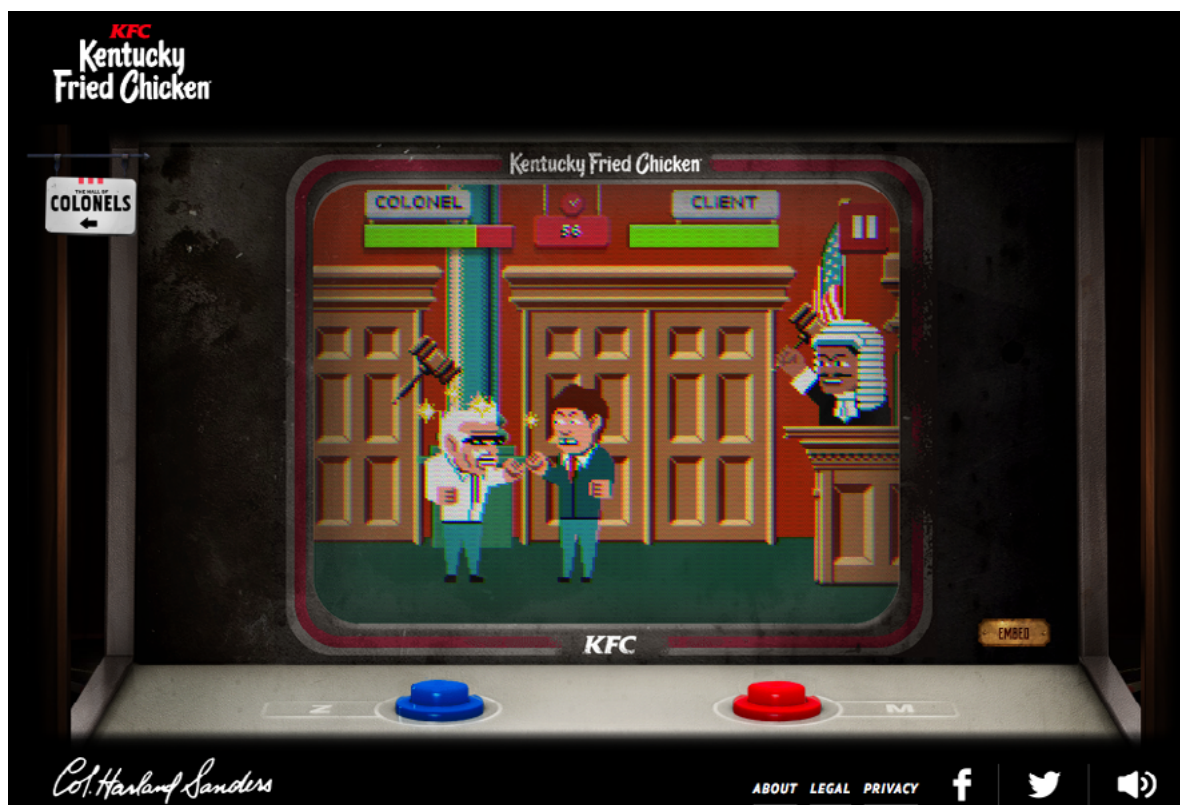


Photo credit: *KFC: The Hall of Colonels*

The habit loop is essentially what makes video games (and other enjoyable activities) fun, and it translates directly to UX design. It is a powerful tool indeed for UX design because it guides – almost trains – users to continually perform favorable actions. With more than 40% of our time spent on habitual actions, formulating the right habits can solidify success.

Gamification works based on human behavior – it coincides with the natural mechanisms of learning and having fun that are already in place before we ever start browsing. According to product design expert and famed author Nir Eyal, all great habits hook users through four interconnected phases:

- **Cues (or triggers)** – In this context, the cues are the visual information that prompts a game player into action.

- **Routines (or actions)** – These are what the player actually does in the game, whether it's fighting monsters, shooting bad guys, or solving puzzles

- **Rewards** – Tangible rewards include leveling up and unlocking achievements or items, while intangible rewards include the visual delight of advanced graphics and fun gameplay

- **Investments** – As players strengthen their character and advance in the plot, they become personally invested in the game's events and final outcome
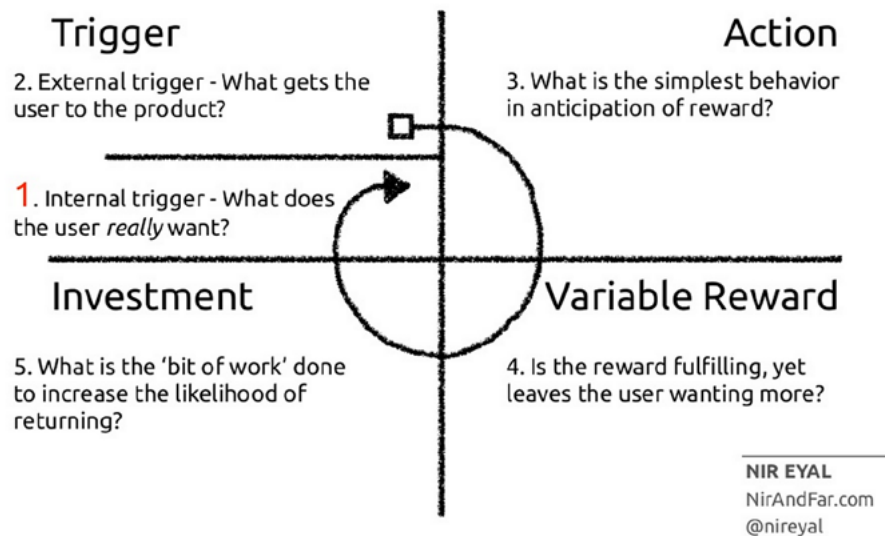
## The hook canvas

**Trigger**

2. External trigger - What gets the user to the product?

1. Internal trigger - What does the user *really* want?

**Action**

3. What is the simplest behavior in anticipation of reward?

**Investment**

5. What is the 'bit of work' done to increase the likelihood of returning?

**Variable Reward**

4. Is the reward fulfilling, yet leaves the user wanting more?

**NIR EYAL**
NirAndFar.com
@nireyal

*Photo credit: Hooked by Nir Eyal*

As shown in Nir's excellent book *Hooked*, you can also see how this "hook canvas" is built into some of today's most popular products, like Pinterest.

## Pinterest

T

Email notification

Collecting, lonesome, seeking connection ...

A

Log-in

I

Pin, Re-Pin, Like, Comment

VR
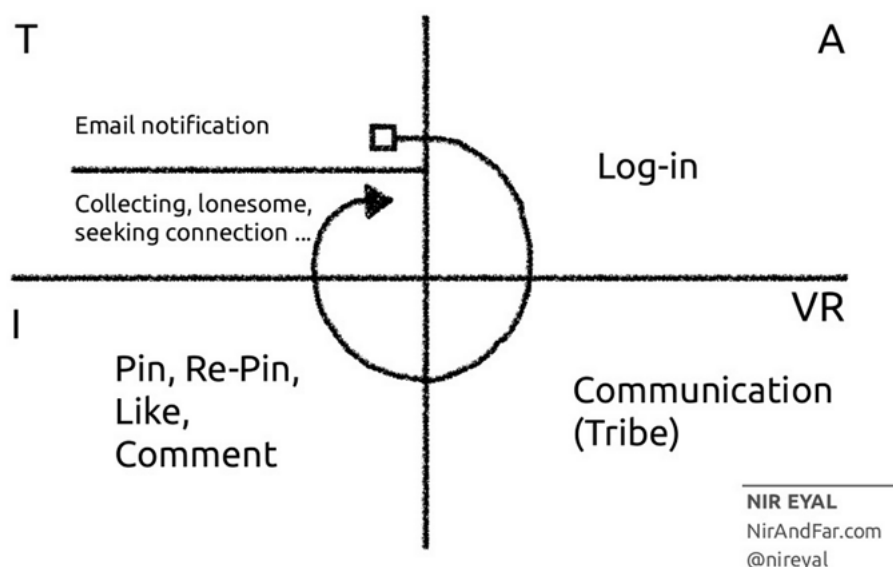
Communication (Tribe)

**NIR EYAL**
NirAndFar.com
@nireyal

*Photo credit: Hooked by Nir Eyal*

Knowing how to integrate this habit loop gives the designer more influence over which actions the user performs, and makes the UX more fun for the user. Know with actions are sustainable and rewarding when done continually, then design them into the format above.

# The History of Gamification and What Went Wrong

The exploitation of the habit loop in both video games and web design is not new, it's just becoming more widespread thanks to new technology. However, it's important to understand where the gamification came from so you can avoid past mistakes.

## A Brief History

Not long ago, gamification was the darling of business talk. Successful initiatives like Volkswagen's campaign The Fun Theory proved that incorporating elements of games can help achieve tangible goals while increasing customer enjoyment. At some point, when Foursquare had its glory days, it seemed that almost anything could be turned into a game by adding points, badges and rankings.

Gamification is so effective in manipulating our natural learning mechanisms, it began to be used in job training. Yet, while successful, its practice is now being met with disdain and resentment for the same reasons web designers are passing it off as an "overrated trend."

*Photo credit: Fun Theory*

As it turns out, gamification is no piece of cake – not for its own qualities, but for its improper usage. Most gamified systems produced mild results, and some caused even quite the opposite effects to those desired.

Early poster children of gamification even started to detach themselves from it: Foursquare, for instance, ended up delegating all gamification features in a separate app – Swarm – that never really managed to stay as relevant as its parent. Stack Overflow explains its success as having nothing to do with the points and badges. And according to Gartner, the penetration of gamification in enterprise last year was no more than 10%.

Even high profile companies like Hubspot acknowledge that it isn't the panacea everyone thought it was in 2011. These days, the mere mention of gamification sounds a bit outdated and tired.

## What Went Wrong

We can distill the past mistakes of gamification into four main points:

1.  **The very notion of a "game"** – Even the name "gamification" is distasteful: it conveys the erroneous notion that everything should look and behave like games. Many companies, product leaders, and consultants, eager to jump on the buzzword wagon, have taken "gamification" literally, creating a pile of goofy products, apps, and systems.

2.  **Misuse of points, badges, and leaderboards** – This is the most visible and annoying aspect of gamification. Product designers started to attach virtual currencies to anything, under the silly premise that if you offer people something to collect, they will try to collect it no matter what. But virtual economies add cognitive noise, introducing unwanted distortions both when they are worth too much and when they are worth nothing.

3.  **Displacement of rewards** – It's been demonstrated that offering any kind of reward on behaviors that should happen spontaneously puts people into "transaction mode," altering the original motivations system and leaving them less motivated than

before. It's crucial to know where and when to take advantage of the habit loop to prevent abusing it.

4. **Condescending tone** – Many gamified systems, for the sake of keeping users motivated, adopt a patronizing treatment, congratulating people in an overly cheerful voice for everything they do. Here, "user-friendly" was somehow interpreted as "toddler-friendly," something most adults won't appreciate. A system that assumes you need to be constantly led by hand makes you feel sort of disabled (remember Clippy).

These mistakes aside, gamification as a design approach *has* introduced very valuable insights and methodologies to product and system design that, if leveraged, definitely improve the user experience.

## Best Practices for Gamification

Below are the lessons the design industry has learned recently from years of doing gamification wrong:

- **Make the users feel smarter** – Enhance the tasks that the user already has to do by removing obstacles and barriers. Guide by hand the first time, then allow users to do it by themselves. Avoid a patronizing tone and keep congratulations to a minimum.

- **Enable discovery of advanced features** – When you hide advanced features, you simultaneously make things simpler for novice users while giving power users a sense of accomplishment and exclu-

sivity. As described in our *Interaction Design Best Practices: Book I*, the discovery of new features gives users tiny, random rewards that makes them more productive and engaged, entrenching a habit loop to search for more.

- **Slick, elegant UI** – Well-planned interfaces – with good performance, smooth transitions, consistent tone, and polished design – make users themselves feel more polished and their tasks better executed. Check out *Web UI Design for the Human Eye: Books I* and *II* for more visual interface design tips.

- **Let users define their standards for progress** – People have wildly different notions of "better." Don't enforce your rules on them, and instead give users ways to set their own milestones. The system should be a measurement tool rather than a coach.

- **Show users their progress** – Make them see their achievements in an objective, rational way. Remind them subtly of how they were when they first began.

- **Flow is critical** – Cut out interruptions. Allow users to immerse themselves completely in a task. Offer discrete feedback to what's happening. If possible, allow users to lose their sense of time. When you are motivated, time flies.

- **Avoid the trap of virtual currencies** – Like real currencies, virtual currencies can rapidly fluctuate in value and become unmanageable. If the currency devalues, it becomes only noise and added complexity. If it becomes too valuable (for example, because it's

tied to money incentives), people will start to trade it and will find ways to cheat or corrupt the system.

- **Don't force things to be a game** – This should be pretty obvious by now. Imposing a game over existing social or behavioral dynamics will make everyone feel awkward. Real games are fun precisely because they are opt-in, not forced. This distinction can make all the difference.

# 7 Examples of
# Great Gamification

## Duolingo

This is the best example of a properly gamified system. Learning languages in Duolingo is really fun, light, and motivating. Its effectiveness in teaching fluency from scratch has been scientifically proven.
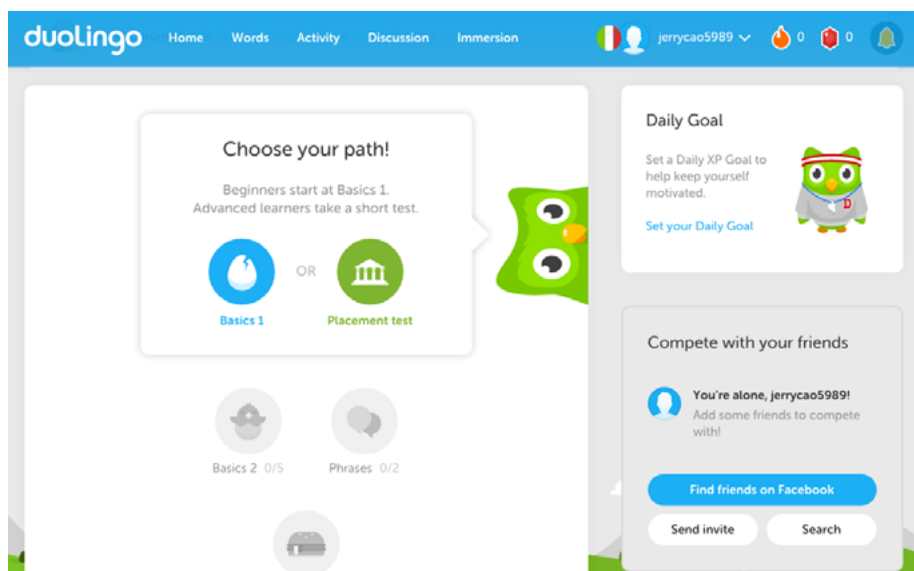


*Photo credit: Duolingo*

The key is that it provides a fun way of learning something that users already wanted to learn. People really want to learn languages for fun, for travel, for business, for relationships, etc. It's so important

to us that we're willing to learn it the boring way – through courses, reading books, and taking tests.

Duolingo is superior because it tackles a tough subject with a light approach and provides the student with a sense of progress. By making you advance through levels, it gives you an objective measure of your advancement. Passing these levels is just the right amount of difficulty, so you'll probably make a few mistakes, which in turn actually enhances the sense of unpredictability that is key to keeping you engaged.

But none of this would work, of course, if people wouldn't want to learn languages in first place.

## Sublime Text

This example may leave you perplexed, as it's a seemingly simple text editor used mainly for writing code. Probably not even the developers thought of gamification when creating it. But that's why Sublime Text is such a brilliant example: it understands that the core delight of gamification lies in natural discoverability, not a forced sense of progress.

Sublime Text gives power users nice tools for enhancing their productivity, while keeping the interface incredibly simple to novice users (who can still use the app right away without much thinking). Users

must discover these controls (literally), as most of them are buried in menus and are not self-explanatory at all.
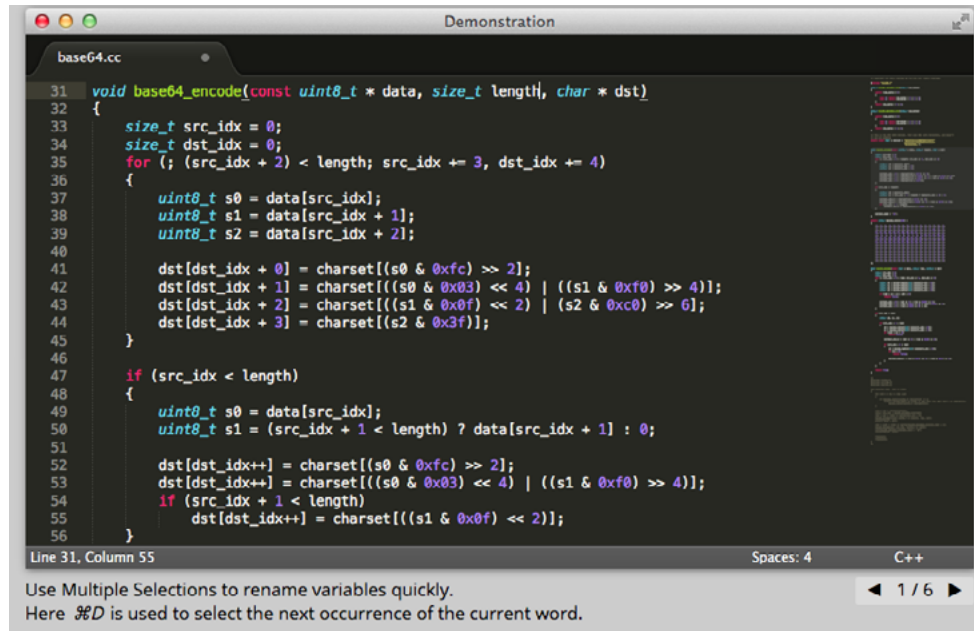


*Photo credit: Sublime Text*

Maybe you hear from one fellow developer that Package Control lets you install amazing extensions and customizations. Maybe you see another developer use a cool selection shortcut to edit several lines at once. Or maybe you just stumble across an article listing some hidden gimmicks. As you get better with the tool, you find better tricks. Over time, the habit loop improves your productivity while making the experience quite addictive.

This sense of discovery and mastery – balanced with a slick, though bareboned interface– makes Sublime Text fun to use. None of these enhancements get in your way or try to be clever with badges or artificial "level up" notifications. Sublime Text represents the spirit of gamification: the discoverables entice users to continue using the app, while rewarding their time with better mastery of the system.

User empowerment is the core to every step of the experience, and no gamified system could ask for more.

## GitHub

GitHub is a weird hybrid of a repository hosting service and a social network. As a repository service it works quite well, but the social features are what makes it shine as the *largest* repository of code in the world.
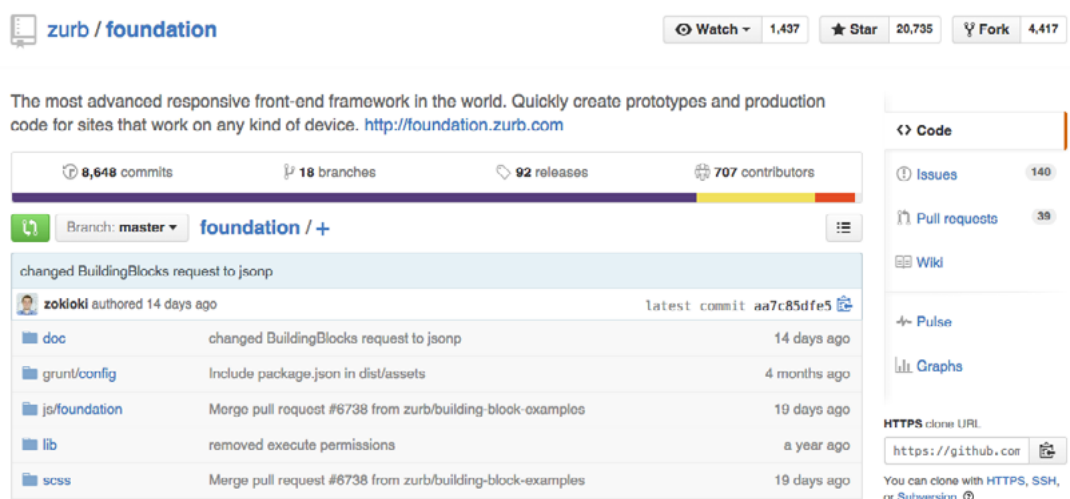


*Photo credit: ZURB Foundation via Github*

Like no other platform, GitHub allows developers to showcase and visualize their work. This is true in many of their features: from the most followed or forked repositories, to the network graph visualizer, the profile contributions graph, and so on.

These tools allow users to assess the quality of a developer in a rational way, so the prestige earned in the platform is completely deserved. That's why many companies who hire developers are actually

relying much more on profiles from GitHub than LinkedIn – or even resumes – and developers in turn show proudly their GitHub profiles as proof of their talent.

The currency of GitHub is true work, which is infinitely more valuable than any point system. Any currency system prone to abuse devalues rapidly (i.e., LinkedIn's skills recommendation system).

## Trello

Most to-do list systems leave you sort of depressed, reminding you constantly of the things you haven't done. The more tasks you pile up, the less likely you are to achieve them.
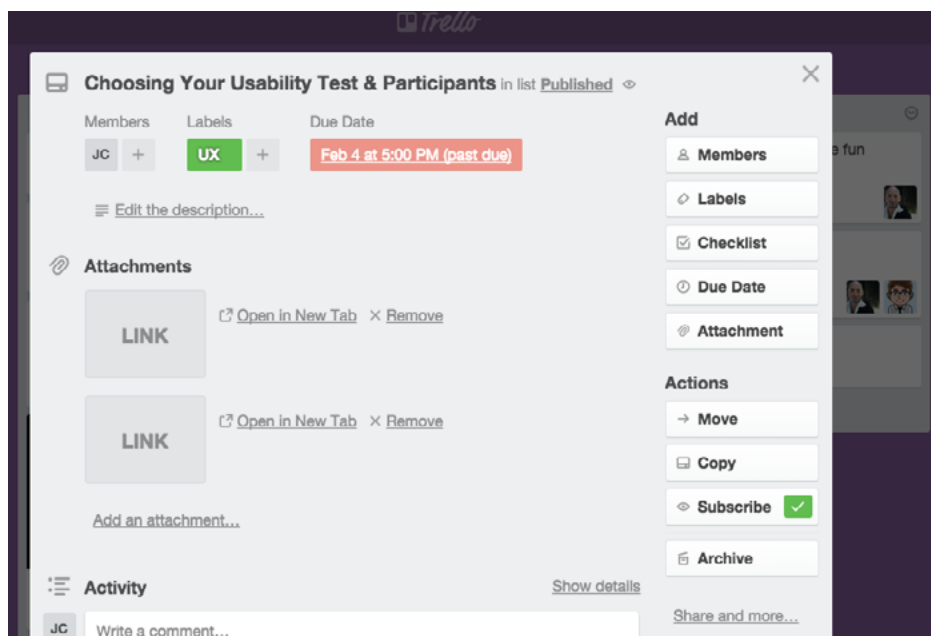


*Photo credit: Sitepoint via Trello*

Far from the typical to-do list, Trello is a notable exception: like the Kanban methodology from which it draws inspiration, it acknowledges

that tasks may have different states, and that the binary "done" and "not done" approach is not useful for most purposes. Intermediate states allow you to differentiate the tasks you started from the things you have not. This is crucial, because starting a task is the most difficult part. A binary to-do list won't let you see that.

Dragging and dropping cards across stacks is natural and helps you feel that you are *actually* making a task move forward. And, most important, you have a stack of "done" cards, so you can see things you already achieved, creating a habit loop that motivates you to achieve more. You don't need badges – the intrinsic reward of seeing a task done is enough. Trello succeeds by recognizing that the things you've done matter as much as the ones you haven't done yet.

## Kiip

Behind-the-scenes kingmakers in the gamification business, Kiip collects brands and apps together to offer real and relevant rewards to encourage user involvement on any platform.

What they're doing has two unique and successful components:

1. **Allows any app to use habit loops** – Kiip naturally incorporates the habit loop into how users interact with an app already. They offer prizes (from partnering brands) for accomplishing the app's normal tasks.

2.  **Real-life rewards** – Kiip takes the habit loop reward to the next level by offering *actual* prizes. With the promise of genuine products/services from partnering brands, Kiip incentivizes deeper interactions on any app that joins.

For example, if a fitness app uses Kiip, their users are gifted health drinks from one of Kiip's partner brands for regularly using the app. These rewards come from normal interactions, say, logging their latest run.
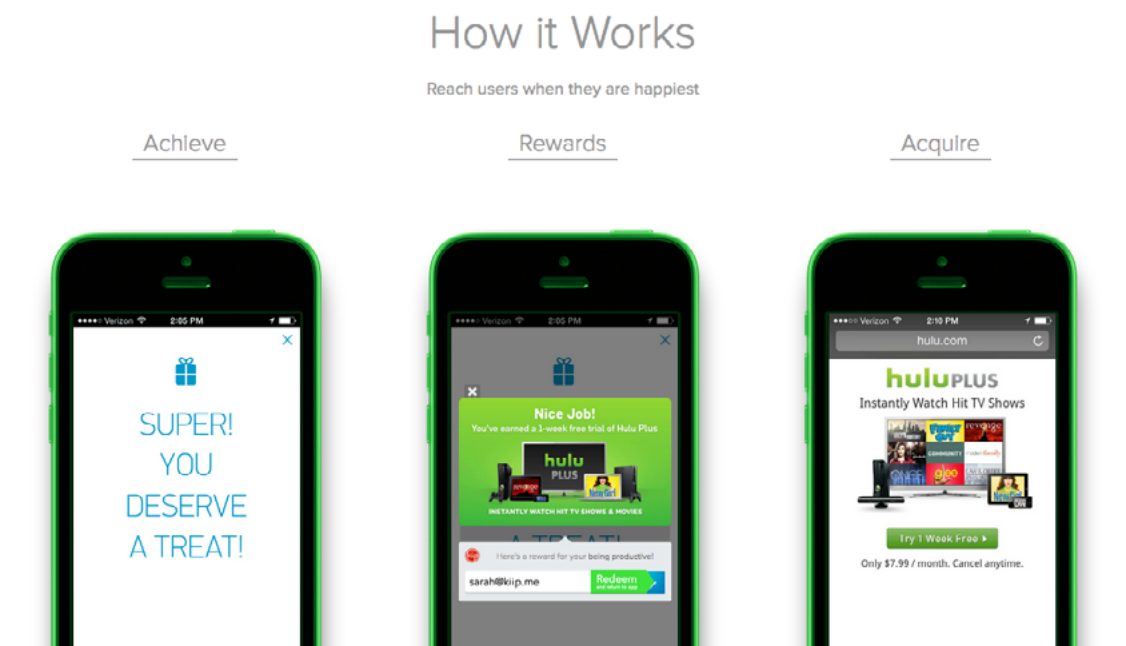


*Photo credit: Kiip*

Kiip is not at all intrusive or artificial: users aren't forced into a game, they are simply rewarded for interacting normally, and so encouraged to interact more. And because the rewards are real, their gamification is truly meaningful.

## Nike+ Apps

Just like Duolingo, Nike+ Apps thrive on the user's own motivation. Their Running, Fuel, and Training apps showcase the standard gamification principles by allowing users to set their own goals and tracking their progress.

Beyond the basics, these apps also take advantage of the merits of competition by enabling users to share their progress in a community setting.



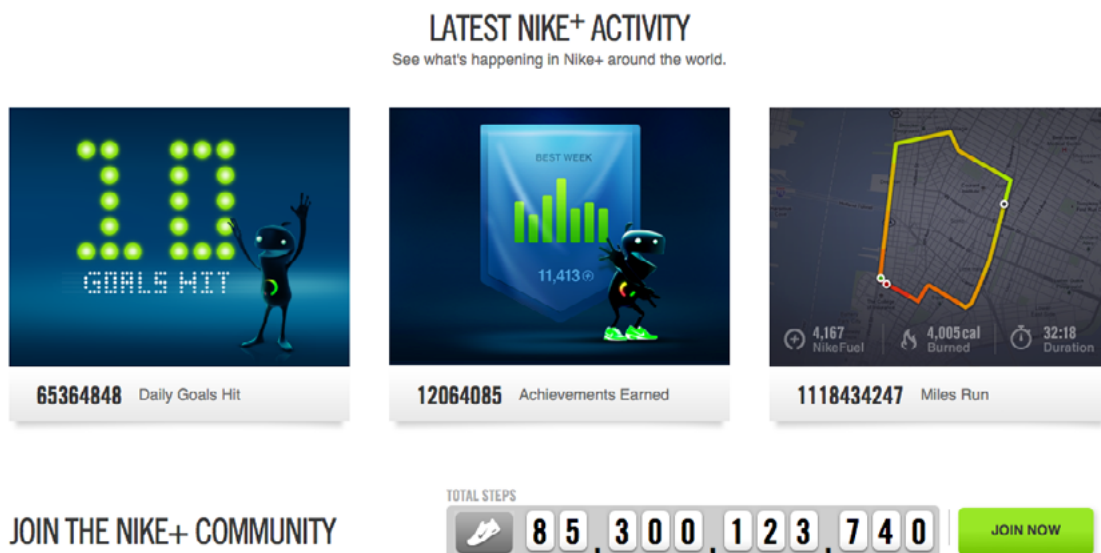*Photo credit: Nike+*

What works about the Nike+ apps, along with other successful gamification apps, is that they enhance what's already there. Their usage of the habit loop fits organically into the structure the users themselves desire.

Nike+ understands that losing weight and staying healthy requires social support to be successful, then transforms that process into

a competitive yet encouraging activity. Design for the path of least resistance, do not gamify by creating artificial motivation.

## Reddit

While not exactly a new or progressive system, Reddit is nonetheless still an admirable example of gamification. The tried-and-true Reddit system works like this: Users vote either upvote or downvote content. Upvoted content rises in the list, gaining visibility, and downvoted content sinks to the bottom.

While this itself is a gamified way to challenge users to post better content, the reason we're mentioning Reddit here is because of its interesting karma currency system.
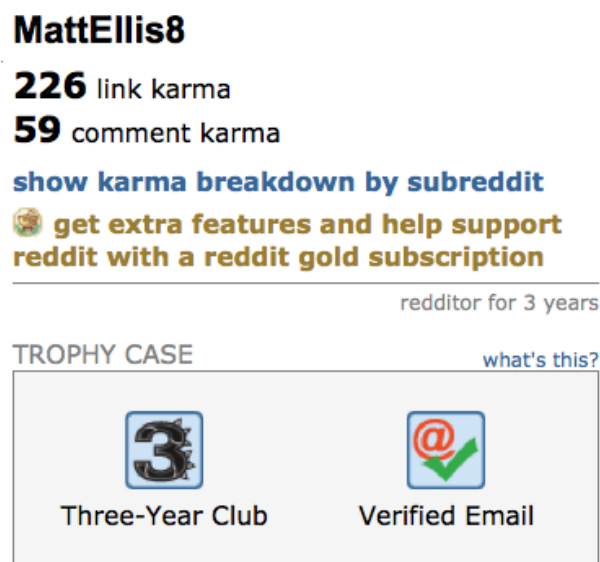
**MattEllis8**

**226** link karma
**59** comment karma

**show karma breakdown by subreddit**
🏅 get extra features and help support reddit with a reddit gold subscription

redditor for 3 years

TROPHY CASE                          what's this?

Three-Year Club          Verified Email

*Photo credit: Reddit*

The name is a clever deviation from the norm, and makes the user want to accumulate it more than if its name were, say, "Reddit points."

These points are awarded whenever a user posts or comments – basically, whenever they interact with the site. In the site's own words, "[Karma] reflects how much good the user has done for the reddit community."

This system works for the site on several levels:

- It incentivizes regular users to interact more to improve their social reputation

- It shows other users how experienced someone is with Reddit, which could affect whether or not they click (or how much value they assign a comment).

The interesting thing about Reddit's karma is that it exists as an ends to itself. Users don't unlock new features or gain special privileges (although the site does have a separate trophy system reminiscent from the gamification of years past). The value of karma is only as much as the individual user assigns to it.

# Conclusion: Gamification for Granted

While gamification is easily dismissed as an outdated trend, don't ignore its evolution just because it wasn't always executed perfectly.

A progressive narrative, an intuitive learning environment, enabling an activity to be either competitive or collaborative, and the overall enjoyable nature of gaming are all concepts that will always apply to UX design.

Once a user is emotionally invested, you've successfully formed a habit of interacting with the design. And that's what it's all about. If you want to make your design addictive, you must make it habitually enjoyable.

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